

The Korea-US Alliance Must Stay Alive

Late at night on December 3rd, South Korea was wide awake. Moments after President Yoon Suk-Yeol declared martial law, citizens flooded the streets to demand an end to the decree. The National Assembly, South Korea's unicameral legislature, forced Yoon to lift martial law only six hours after it first shook the country with a 190-0 vote.

Following a failed impeachment motion on December 7th, opposition parties on December 14th successfully voted to impeach Yoon. Given that the Democratic Party (DP) acts as the main opposition to Yoon's conservative People Power Party, DP leader Lee Jae-Myung led the impeachment effort. Within the next 180 days, the South Korean Supreme Court must decide whether Yoon will leave or remain in office.

[Tara O](#) of the East Asia Research Center states that Lee, who was recently sentenced to one year in prison for violating election law, will likely replace Yoon as president if Yoon steps down. The DP advocates for starkly different policies from those of the PPP. Notably, Lee's party supports improving South Korea's relations with North Korea, as well as with other competitors in the region.

As president, Yoon strived to achieve the opposite of what the DP wanted by strengthening Korea's alliance with the US. In August of 2023, the US, South Korea, and Japan held a historical trilateral summit at Camp David, issuing a joint statement acknowledging the three countries' cooperation. In any case, South Korea must continue collaborating with the US to safeguard its sovereignty and weather threats from the North.

Since the Korean War, the US has protected South Korea from North Korean invasion, with more than 24,000 US soldiers currently stationed in South Korea. Without the US military presence, South Korea will grow significantly more vulnerable in the eyes of the North Korean regime.

This danger may become a reality if the Supreme Court removes Yoon. If Lee takes office, the Spirit of Camp David—the joint US-Korea-Japan statement of 2023—will become nothing less than null. Lee and the DP do not like Yoon's efforts to solidify relations with the US and Japan, their dislike evident in Yoon's first impeachment motion accusing Yoon of "[antagonizing](#)" North Korea, China, and Russia.

Richard Lawless, former US Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, [stated](#) that the DP would be "willing to sacrifice [...] most of the [US] alliance structure in return for its progressive policies vis-à-vis North Korea." Improving South Korea's relations with North Korea does not mean moving toward a peaceful reunification—with the current oppressive North Korean regime, reunification translates to invasion.

In 2021, Lee called the US an "[occupying force](#)," referring to the American troops that had fought in the Korean War to defend South Korea against North Korean forces. In saying so, he blatantly downplayed the 36,000 American soldiers who had lost their lives to protect his country. He not only belittled them but also deemed them hostile. Unsurprisingly, he wants the current US active-duty military stationed in South Korea to withdraw. Fulfilling his wish means endangering the entire nation.

Lee's stance on the Korea-US alliance does not reflect what the majority of South Korea believes. In the streets, protestors opposing Yoon's removal not only waved the Korean flag but also that of America. Amid political tension among South Korean parties that disagree on which countries to side with, the Korea-US alliance must come out alive.